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ABSTRACT

This digest describes support strategies for overcoming obstacles to finding and maintaining employment for students with emotional disorders. These youths may avoid risk-taking situations and often have difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication, such as struggling to make telephone calls to employers and exhibiting limited communication skills and eye contact. Obstacles to holding a job include difficulty following instructions and staying on task, inability to accept feedback, acting before thinking, and general lack of socially acceptable work behaviors. Support strategies include functional community-referenced assessment, modified supported employment, career skills preparation, problem-solving implementation, allowing natural consequences to occur, and action planning. A list of five organizational resources, and five electronic resources concludes the digest. Contains six references. (SW)

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VOCATIONAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL DISORDERS

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Youths with emotional and behavioral disorders often face a range of compounding factors that may include poor socioeconomic status, limited education, single-parent households, dysfunctional family relationships, incest, sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, violence in the home, and unemployment (Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 1993). Their support needs are dramatic, and, if not addressed, result in behaviors that lead to dropping out or expulsion from school, termination from work, and, in many cases, incarceration (Marder & D'Amico, 1992). Wagner (1993) notes that youths with emotional disorders have the highest arrest rate 3 to 5 years out of school and the highest dropout rate of all other disability groups.

To address these behaviors and facilitate vocational success, youth empowerment, community-based services, and individualized help are necessary support strategies. Most importantly, the process must give clear direction to support providers as to the unique needs of youths with emotional disorders and allow these youths to be in charge of their lives and futures.

Obstacles to Finding Employment

This population consistently encounters certain barriers in finding and maintaining employment. Ineffective verbal and nonverbal communication and avoiding risk-taking experiences present challenges. After obtaining a job, they may have difficulties following instructions, staying on task, accepting feedback, planning ahead, and demonstrating socially acceptable work behaviors.

Difficulty with Verbal and Nonverbal Communication. Struggles with making phone calls and going through the interview process are common for youths with emotional disorders because they may have difficulties in verbal expression. Nonverbal communication skills may also be underdeveloped as evidenced through poor posture; limited eye contact; voice tone; facial expressions; and inappropriate dress, hairstyles, or jewelry. This nonconforming appearance combined with limited communication skills often creates a negative first impression for employers and thus becomes a barrier to obtaining employment.

Avoidance of Risk-Taking Situations. While youths with emotional disorders may have a desire to obtain employment, they may also have a desire to avoid a perceived risk-taking situation, as demonstrated by a lack of follow-through with job search activities and "cold feet" as they near possible employment. Further, the experience of success in any life area is often viewed as a risk-taking situation because it may be unfamiliar territory with increased responsibilities and pressures. Because of this fear of the unknown, potentially successful opportunities are often sabotaged to avoid risky situations.

Obstacles to Maintaining Employment

Upon securing a job, youths with emotional disorders struggle with maintaining a job (Wagner, 1993). Following instructions and staying on task are an ongoing challenge. There often are difficulties taking instruction from someone considered to be an authority figure. Therefore, when instructions are given, the outcome may be a power struggle between youths and their employers, which may result in job loss. Many youths from this population are also multiply diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and learning disabilities, all of which may make staying on task and following instructions even more of a challenge (Hughes, Deshler, Ruhl & Shumaker, 1993).

Accepting Feedback. A low sense of self-worth may contribute to an inability to deal with criticism and accept constructive feedback. In addition, many youths with emotional disorders have trouble managing their anger in a confrontational situation. As a result, confrontation on the job may lead to an explosive situation and end in job loss.

Planning Ahead. Reactive, impulsive behaviors often preclude planning ahead and anticipating undesirable consequences. On the job, these youths often act before they think, which may lead to negative consequences.

General Lack of Socially Acceptable Work Behaviors. The collective behaviors of youths with emotional disorders tend to indicate an overall lack of work ethic. Behaviors such as sticking with a job, taking initiative, coming to work on time, working to the best of one's ability, ending a job appropriately, or showing respect are often not apparent. One reason may be that many youths have not had role models that demonstrate effective work skills.

Strategies for Support

Support strategies for this population might include the following:

Functional Community Referenced-Assessment. A community-based assessment process assists youths with emotional disorders (as well as individuals with other types of disabilities) in choosing and getting a job. This highly individualized process identifies strengths, interests, barriers, and support strategies in the work, school, community, recreational, home, and social-emotional domains. An ongoing approach, offering volunteer, short-term work trials to youth, uses community-based resources for constant learning opportunities. "Hands-on" experiences create a greater sense of personal confidence and lower the risk associated with acquiring a job. Assessment information targets specific behavior support needs for each youth, allowing for the immediate and ongoing implementation of functional behavioral support strategies. Assessment information provides direction for job development, vocational support strategies, and training needs.

Modified Supported Employment. Many youths with emotional disorders need very little help with on-the-job skill acquisition and therefore typically will not benefit from a traditional job coach model. These youths need support with problem-solving, effective communication, and demonstration of appropriate behaviors in the workplace. Members of this population may be very concerned about fitting in with co-workers and peers and not being stigmatized in any way. Therefore a modified version of supported employment uses an employment consultant rather than a job coach. An employment consultant: (1) helps to educate employers; (2)

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facilitates problem-solving and effective communication; and (3) provides "behind the scenes" support.

Career Skills Preparation. Many youths with emotional disorders respond well to individualized support. Therefore, the employment consultant works with youths individually to develop effective resumes, fill out applications, and practice interview skills. This support combined with an experiential, community-based career skills curriculum is particularly effective (Bullis & Gaylord-Ross, 1991; Groisser & Pennington, 1991) in preparing youths with emotional disorders for the job search process.

Problem-Solving Implementation. At the time of job placement, the youth, the employer, and the employment consultant sign a problem-solving agreement. This agreement helps to facilitate open communication between all parties and allows everyone to plan ahead for any future conflicts. If a problem arises, the agreement specifies a list of problem-solving steps. If the problem persists, the agreement provides for implementation of a behavioral contract. This tool also helps employers recognize the needs of this population and learn how to develop effective support strategies.

Allowing Natural Consequences to Occur. As noted above, many youths with emotional disorders are experiential learners. Some of the most meaningful learning opportunities occur as the result of natural consequences. For example, if youths continually act out on a job and refuse to take steps to correct their disruptive behavior, the best option may be to experience the natural consequences of losing their job. In this situation, the employment consultant can turn an unfortunate circumstance into a learning opportunity by helping youths process their experience and learn what to do differently in the future.

Action Planning. Youths with emotional disorders can be empowered to be in charge of every aspect of their lives through an action planning process. They look at each domain of their lives and decide what priority areas must be addressed to achieve successful employment outcomes. The employment consultant is available to help establish a timeline and set realistic goals and objectives. This action plan is reviewed repeatedly to guide support services, check progress, and adjust goals. In this way, service provision is youth driven.

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Resources

The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 22091
703/620-3660

National Transition Network
Institute on Community Integration
University of Minnesota
6 Pattee Hall
150 Pillsbury Drive, SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455
612/624-1062

Transition Research Institute at Illinois
University of Illinois
113 Children's Research Center
51 Gerty Drive
Champaign, IL 61820
217/333-2325

HEATH Resource Center
One Dupont Circle, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20036-1193
1/800/544-3284

National Center for Research in Vocational Education
University of California at Berkeley
Office of Special Populations
345 Education Building
1310 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820
217/333-0807

Developing Social Vocational Skills in Handicapped Individuals, Digest #447, ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children, Reston, VA

Electronic Resources

Digests published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education are available for downloading or onsite reading on the AskERIC Virtual Library *(ericir.syr.edu).*

The following Internet sites provide additional information on vocational information for students with disabilities:

Telnet sites:	*vocserv.berkeley.edu* National Center for Research in Vocational Education
Listservs:	
PERKACT	Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act Address: *listserv@siuvmb.siu.edu* Post to: *perkact@siuvmb.siu.edu*
VOCEVAL	Vocational evaluation, adaptive technology Address: *listserv@sjuvm.stjohns.edu* Post to: *voceval@sjuvm.stjohns.edu*
VOCNET	Vocational education Address: *listserv@cmsa.berkeley.edu* Post to: *vocnet@dmsa.berkeley.edu*

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